United Nations S/2013/138

Security Council

Distr.: General
7 March 2013
English
Original: Arabic

Identical letters dated 6 March 2013 from the Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council

On instructions from my Government, I should like to draw your attention to the information set forth below, concerning the attacks that are carried out by the armed terrorist groups in Syria on the country's historic cultural sites. Syria is the repository of more than 10,000 years of mankind's cultural heritage.

Since the beginning of the events in the country, the Syrian Arab Republic has continually kept Ms. Irina Bokova, Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Executive Council and the World Heritage Committee informed about the attacks to which historic sites and cultural and archaeological features are subjected by the armed terrorist groups. Such attacks have even targeted unique Syrian sites that are inscribed in the World Heritage List, including, inter alia, the city of Busra al-Sham and the old city and suqs of Aleppo, as well as Apamea, Krak des Chevaliers and the Madiq Citadel.

On 28 February 2013, the armed terrorist groups in Syria, including men from the Al-Qaida-affiliated Al-Nusra Front, destroyed and looted the Islamic Library in the Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo, one of the most valuable Islamic libraries of the region, which contained priceless Islamic relics and Quranic manuscripts that date back to before the Mamluk period that lasted from 1250-1517 A.D. Items of immeasurable value were taken to Turkey. It should be noted that the Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo is a historic Islamic site, having been built in 716 A.D., in the Umayyad era.

We are in complete agreement with the international consensus on terrorism having no religion, and the world can see today that the extremist terrorist groups in Syria are yet again proving that to be the case. They are not satisfied with concentrating their attacks on Islamic religious sites, but have extended their ignorant fanaticism to those of various historic religions that reflect the diversity and richness of Syrian society and its unique cultural and religious heritage. Those groups have attacked, destroyed and looted scores of churches, including, as just one example, the Cathedral of the Belt of the Virgin Mary in Homs, which is of the greatest religious, historical and spiritual importance, particularly for Syrians, and was built in the first century A.D. The church has that name because it contains a belt that was worn by the Virgin Mary.

Please recycle

The extremists have also attacked the historic Jewish synagogue in the Jawbar area of Damascus, looting and completely destroying it. That synagogue was built in 720 B.C. and research indicates that it was the first and most ancient synagogue, that survived and stayed just as it was when it was first built.

The erroneous ideas of those groups have also driven them to target historic cultural sites in Syria. Recently, for example, they defaced and removed the head of the ancient statue of the Syrian poet, philosopher and intellectual Abu al-Ala' al-Ma'arri, on the pretext that the great poet was an atheist. They also justified their destruction of the statue by the claim that idols should not be worshipped.

In intellectual circles, al-Ma'arri, who lived from 973 to 1057 A.D., is considered as a distinguished international personality who provided many philosophers in the middle ages with the rudiments of philosophy, thought and mysticism, while his intellectual and cultural output influenced numerous world poets and intellectuals, including the author of the Divine Comedy, Italian poet Dante Alighieri. It is claimed in many studies that that poetic epic is a European version of al-Ma'arri's *Risalat al-Ghufran*.

The attacks on historic and cultural sites that have been carried out in various parts of Syria provide additional proof of the barbarous and fanatical ideology of the extremist terrorist and Al-Qaida-affiliated groups in Syria and of the type of culture that those fanatics and foreign mercenaries have in mind for the tolerant and open society of Syria.

That culture, which is so foreign to Syrian society, and which is hostile to openness, knowledge, and cultural, intellectual and artistic endeavour, brings to mind the Taliban in Afghanistan, who destroyed the statues of the Buddha in Bamiyan, and the Al-Qaida-affiliated groups in Mali, who destroyed mausoleums in Timbuktu that were on the List of World Heritage in Danger. In the countries of the so-called Arab Spring, a series of attacks have also recently been carried out against sites of historic, cultural and intellectual importance. In Tunisia, for example, the thirteenth century tomb of the venerable holy man Abu Said was set on fire. In Egypt, certain extremists issued a number of fatwas demanding that the pyramids and Sphinx should be destroyed because they were idols. In Libya, extremists have destroyed many historic tombs in the belief that they were those of Sufi figures who flouted Islamic precepts. The tomb of the nineteenth century Sufi scholar Sheikh Abdul-Salam al-Asmar was razed and extremist Salafists set fire to the library of the mosque in Zliten. Many historic documents and manuscripts have been ruined in Libya.

The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic holds the armed terrorist groups, including those with extremist Takfiri ideology, and the States that support them, fully responsible for all the attacks that those groups have carried out or may carry out against cultural and archaeological monuments in Syria, and calls upon those States to honour the provision in article 6, paragraph 3, of the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, that "Each State Party to this Convention undertakes not to take any deliberate measures which might damage directly or indirectly the cultural and natural heritage referred to in Articles 1 and 2 situated on the territory of other States Parties to this Convention." In this regard, Syria commends the international conference that was held under the auspices of UNESCO in Amman from 10 to 13 February 2013 and addressed the protection of the Syrian cultural heritage and the illicit trafficking in cultural

property. At the conclusion of its business, that conference recommended that all parties to the conference should prepare an international plan to work with the Syrian General Directorate for Antiquities and Museums in protecting and defending the cultural heritage of Syria.

The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic stresses the need for all States to assume their responsibilities with regard to the provisions of international law and instruments that relate to the preservation of the world cultural heritage, and halt all acts of destruction and looting and incitement to the same. It is vital that all those who participated in such crimes are held accountable and that all items stolen from Syria are returned.

By means of the present letter, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic wishes to alert the United Nations Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council to the escalation in the number of attacks against cultural sites in Syria. Such attacks are carried out with the collusion and encouragement of certain regional and international States, and historic items are stolen and smuggled out of Syria.

In conclusion, I should like to recall the famous statement made by the French archaeologist and former Director of the Louvre, André Parrot, to the effect that every civilized person has two homelands: his own and Syria.

I should be grateful if this letter could be circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Bashar **Ja'afari**
Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic